



Dealing With Cultural Differences in the Workplace

Your office has hired a new employee who recently migrated to the U.S. from Singapore. Although she seems nice, you notice she never directly looks at you when speaking and avoids eye contact with others in the office. At first, you find this unsettling and wonder if she has something to hide or is even ignoring you. After mentioning it to a friend who has traveled to Singapore, however, you learn that direct eye contact can be considered aggressive or rude in that culture.

This is one of many examples of misunderstandings that can occur unintentionally at work due to cultural differences. Since workplaces are more culturally diverse than ever before, the approach you take in relating to others may require some extra effort.

How to make the most of your culturally diverse workplace

Below are ways to help everyone avoid misunderstandings and work more harmoniously at work.

Become an international “student.” Taking the time to learn about coworkers’ cultural norms can benefit everyone. When done in a respectful manner, showing interest in another person’s culture can break down barriers and help you understand behaviors that are unusual to you. For example, knowing that asking open-ended questions

rather than those requiring yes-or-no responses is more favorable since, in some cultures, people consider it rude or find it embarrassing to say “no.” Understanding this will help you receive the feedback you need from your team.

Find a common connection. There are topics that are considered taboo when talking with colleagues, especially when you are just getting to know them. To be respectful of someone’s personal beliefs, avoid talking about religion, politics, or salaries when you are getting to know them. Stick to universal subjects like food, family, or sports.

Imagining your roles are reversed. Take the time to put yourself in your coworkers’ shoes, especially if language barriers or differing viewpoints become frustrating. Consider what the experience might be like for the other person.

Communicating with someone who has adopted your first language as their second language may sometimes seem time-consuming or challenging. But imagine yourself not only trying to communicate, but to work and succeed in a country where your native language isn’t widely spoken. Be aware of making cultural references, using slang, or telling jokes that not everyone will understand, and take the time to make sure you and coworkers are on the same page.

Make yourself available if a colleague needs further clarification, as some people may be too shy to ask questions. Becoming aware of the obstacles new immigrants face in the workplace is a good way to connect, provide reassurance, and avoid misunderstandings.

Leading toward a new understanding. As a manager or people leader, you can also ensure your employees embrace cultural diversity by setting an example. Build an inclusive workplace by:

Acknowledging cultural differences. Recognize cultural holidays and practices and try to develop an understanding of religious observances.

Easing “all work, no play.” Have potluck lunches once a month or host informal team socials in person or by video chat to unite your staff. These events allow people who wouldn’t normally spend time together to get to know everyone and appreciate them on a personal level.

Creating a diversity committee. Designate a group to specifically deal with personal culture, communication, and inclusion issues in the workplace, and also act as a resource for new employees who are recent immigrants or expats.

Understand the positive affect of an inclusive workplace. Research confirms that discrimination is a contributing factor to mental health disorders. Work toward creating an inclusive workplace to improve your team’s mental health.

With the spread of globalization, a rise in the growth rate of expat assignments, and an overall increase in immigration, the workplace is more culturally rich than ever before. While this may sometimes present challenges, understanding and respecting diversity can help you, your colleagues, and your workplace to thrive.

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